DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 064 PS 025 353

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TITLE Facilitating Social Competence in a School-Age Care Setting: A School-Age Care Staff Development Manual.
PUB DATE 97
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

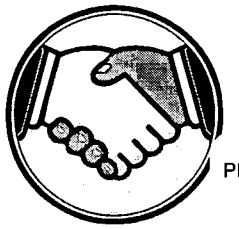
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS After School Centers; After School Programs; Child Caregivers; *Children; Elementary Education; *Interpersonal Competence; *School Age Day Care; Staff Development; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Before School Programs

ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that the school-age caregiver can effectively facilitate children's development, this monograph for staff development examines reasons for teaching children social skills and presents a step-by-step method to do so. Seven skills are considered paramount: community-building, control, confidence, curiosity, coping, communication, and conflict resolution. The guide takes the position that it is necessary to teach social skills because of the lack of traditional mechanisms that once facilitated these skills, such as the extended family, and that social skills may be linked to enhanced social competence, self-esteem, prosocial behavior, and a higher quality of life. The guide asserts that child care programs are an ideal location to teach social skills because they provide a multi-aged, grouped, relatively unstructured time. According to the guide, social skills may be taught formally or informally. The components of formal instruction are to: (1) evaluate the need for teaching, (2) research the curricula available; (3) teach social skills with several methods and facilitate transfer and generalization; and (4) follow through with reinforcement over time. Informal teaching can reinforce the social skills learned through formal means. In addition, a number of individual social skills may be trained, including communication, conflict resolution, and coping. Includes a worksheet to evaluate social skills. Contains 20 references. (KDFB)

Facilitating Social Competence

in a School-Age Care Setting



A School-Age Care Staff Development Manual

by Jim Ollhoff

Facilitating Social Competence in a School-Age Care Setting

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1. Introduction and Overview

Little Joey, a first grader, consistently plays too rough. His games with other children often result in some kind of physical violence, and many of the children don't want to play with Joey anymore. When he gets frustrated, he throws books or pencils or tries to break something. During outside free time, Joey always recruits some of the other boys for a martial arts kick-em-sock-em roleplay.

Sarah rarely makes eye contact with anyone. She is obedient enough, but doesn't talk much. Sarah's face is always toward the floor. Without many friends, she frequently plays by herself, but never plays a new game. She shies away from any new experiences.

Some of the staff call Jacob "competitive." But it is more than that. When Jacob loses a game, he cries, argues, or lies about the outcome. In the gym, Jacob is intense and fiery, screaming at his teammates who make a mistake. Every game is a contest, and every contest seems to be a life or death struggle for Jacob. No one has ever seen Jacob laugh.

This monograph is meant to help school-age care workers explore a critical issue—why we need social skills and how to facilitate them in a school-age care setting. Children do not just "kind of learn" social skills. That used to be true! Learning social skills used to be a tacit, natural part of the socialization process. For a variety of reasons, that socialization no longer occurs. What once came in the process of socialization, now must be taught intentionally. School-age care is the premier place for children to learn those skills.

The first section of the monograph discusses why there is a need to teach social skills to children. The next section explains a step-by-step method for teaching social skills. The final section looks at a number of skills individually, with a brief comment about each of the skills.

A school-age care-giver is a facilitator of positive development. School-age care is part of the village that raises the child. It is important we know something about imparting and communicating the values and the skills to peacefully live together. Our global village depends on those values and skills.

2. What is a Social Skill?

A number of definitions of *social skill* have been put forth. There has not been a single definition that has enraptured the social-psychological community.

Social skills are verbal and nonverbal expressions that individuals use to perform a social task; Social skills make up the package of social competence (Alberg, 1994).

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is a facilitator of positive development.
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Another definition is given by Combs and Slaby (1977), "the ability to interact with others in a given social context in specific ways that are socially acceptable or valued and at the same time personally beneficial, mutually beneficial, or beneficial primarily to others."

Perhaps the easiest way to define them is to give examples. Again, different researchers give different lists and use different categories. Alberg (1994) divides all the social skills into four categories (with some examples): Communication (i.e., conversing, negotiating), Interpersonal (making friends, asserting, interacting, sharing), Personal (self-awareness, dealing with feelings), and Response skills (dealing with stress, empathy, receiving directions).

Stephens (1992) also uses four categories: Environmental behaviors (i.e., care for the environment, dealing with emergencies); Interpersonal behaviors (coping with conflict, helping others); Self-related behaviors (expressing feelings, ethical behavior); and Task-related behaviors (following directions, group activities).

Table 1 identifies our list of social skills. It outlines seven different social skills, and lists subskills under each major skill. Certainly, there is overlap and blurred lines between some of the skills. It might be possible to move some of the skills into other categories. However, the table outlines a defensible division.

3. Why Teach Social Skills?

Learning social skills used to be a natural part of the socialization process. A generation ago, kids learned social skills naturally. Children had to learn negotiation skills when there were six siblings in one bed. Children had to learn sharing when there was only hand-me-downs to wear. Children had to learn responsibility when it was their job to milk the cows in the morning (if they forgot, no one had milk). Children learned maturity from the three-and-a-half hours they spent talking with an adult everyday. Society was organized so that children would learn social skills as a natural part of growing up.

Today that is no longer true. Most of the mechanisms that helped facilitate social skills are gone. Extended family is gone. Time with adults is minimal and superficial. Instead of interaction, we have television.

What Elkind calls *the postmodern family* has some advantages for children. But the changes in the family have better met the needs of adults, more than the needs of children (Elkind, 1994).

The skills that children once learned automatically, now must be intentionally taught. So the social skill curriculums were born.

Originally, the social skills curriculums were designed to improve the skills of psychologically disabled. Most of the early teaching and early research focused on that population. As successes grew, it began to be used with delinquent adolescents as well. The research evidence for its efficacy as well as the anecdotal stories of its success continued to grow.

Then, the field of social skill teaching spilled over into the "normal" populations. Not delinquents, not kids with mental illness, no young serial killers; just plain ordinary kids in the average school.

4. The Importance of Social Competence

Poor social competence is linked to a number of problems in adolescence and adulthood, including delinquency, school suspension, truancy and dropping out of school (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972). Lack of social skills are associated with future mental health problems (Cowen, Pederson, Babigan, Izzo, & Troast, 1973).

Youth are only 20% of the population, yet commit 40% of the crimes. Twenty percent of high school youth have carried a gun to school in the last month. No youth, after a childhood of nurture and esteem, spontaneously decides to commit a crime or carry a gun. Violent youth have been on a developmental pathway toward violence since early childhood, perhaps even infancy.

Community-Building
friendship skills
working in a group
cooperation
empathy

Control
internal locus
self-discipline
responsibility

Confidence
self-esteem
sense of capableness
sense of being loved

Curiosity
adventure
play and de-stressing
intrinsic motivation
desire to learn

Coping
dealing with stress
anger management
dealing with crisis
self-control

Communication
expressing feelings
listening
assertiveness

Conflict Resolution
aversion to violence
negotiation skills
resolution strategies

Table 1 - The Seven Social Skills Children Need

Fifty-six thousand children die each year from lack of social skills and lack of social support. This includes those who are victims of murder, abuse, and suicide; deaths from conflict and pregnancy-related complications; from drinking and driving; from those who ran away and were never heard from again (Glenn, 1989). Giving the gift of social skills would be a remarkable preventative to those horrible statistics.

Better social skills means greater social competence. Social competence creates high self-esteem, which creates more social competence, creating higher self-esteem. Greater social competence means greater prosocial behavior, which creates more community. Greater social competence means better social support, which increases social competence. Greater social support means greater intimacy, better health, and a better quality of life. These upward feedback loops create ascending spirals of success and effectiveness that pull other dynamics up with them.

5. Why Teach it in Child Care?

Schools have difficulty teaching social skills for a variety of reasons. Teachers may not have the expertise; schedules are highly structured; children sit in rows with little chance to interact; children are all the same age; and subjects are regimented by legislatures to teach a certain number of minutes per subject per day.

Parents have difficulty teaching social skills for a number of reasons. Parents may not have the expertise; they may not have the time; they are with only their own children, and do not have the chance to see the children as they need the skill—in a peer situation.

School-age care is a multi-aged, grouped, relatively unstructured time, with high adult-child interaction. This is the only place in the lives of many children where they are in a group of people who have to learn to get along.

The flexible schedule allows for structured teaching of social skills. The unregimented time allows for the flexibility to grab the teachable moment, following through with the one-on-one coaching needed to generalize the skill into new situations. The best time to teach conflict resolution is during conflict. The best time to teach curiosity is in the times they are curious. Taking advantage of the teachable moment is the best way to help children see that social skills can be used in real-life situations.

The fact that school-age care is a multi-aged setting is an advantage because the older children can help the younger children. Through mentoring, peer mediation, children who are assistant social skill teachers, etc., the younger children can learn the skills from the older children and the older children get the skills of monitoring, prosocial behaviors, and caring.

Children in school-age care are in a group. Children who live in a group must get along. Certain skills need to be learned by children who play together all morning and afternoon.

David Elkind says that the experiment with nuclear family as the ideal place to nurture children does not have good research support (1994). Through most of human history, the community raised the child. That is still the ideal place to raise children. The community and the extended family have the resources to raise children. We have put too much responsibility on the nuclear family, and it is stressed and bowing under the pressure. The community and the extended family must retake the responsibility to raise, nurture, and teach children.

There is no way to retrieve the real extended family. Grandparents, cousins, and siblings live too far away. Our society is mobile and transient, and likely to stay that way. However, school-age care can be the new extended family. School-age care performs most of the functions that the previous generation's extended family performed (Ollhoff, 1995). More intentionality is required in school-age care. Care providers must see themselves as facilitators of positive development and teachers of social skills. School-age care could be the extended family for children in the years to come.

6. The Two Ways to Teach Social Competence

In order to maximize the effectiveness of a social skills teaching program, the subject must be taught in two ways: *formally* and *informally*.

Teaching social skills formally is to sit them down and teach the skill. Whether we use a commercially-prepared curriculum, an activity book, or our own ideas, some structured teaching time is important. We might talk about he skill, see a skit, watch a video, role-play, or practice, but it is still a formal time to let children know the skill and the issues.

Informal teaching is all the ways we coach them to use the skills in a natural setting—when we do it on the fly. One informal teaching method is the teachable moment—teaching conflict resolution when we have a conflict. Another way to teach social skills informally is the natural process of being a role model.

7. Teaching Social Skills Formally

There are four components of teaching social skills: Evaluate, Research, Teach, Assess.

The first component is to **evaluate** the need for social skills in the room. Which skills are present? Which skills are needed for peaceful life together? Which skills are lacking?

This needs to be a careful process, because a lack of a social skill could mean one (or more) of three possibilities. There may be a *skill deficit*—the child does not know the necessary skill. There may be a *performance deficit*—the child knows the skill, but does it poorly. There may be a *self-control deficit*—the child knows the skill, and could perform it adequately, but the lack of some other skill (like anger management) interferes with the successful performance of the skill. (See Evaluating Social Skills Worksheet).

If there is a social skill deficit, the need is for intentional, structured teaching. If there is a performance deficit, there is a need for practice--like role play and closely monitored coaching. If there is a need for a self-control deficit, then the need is to teach the other skills that have led to the skill interference.

Research curriculums is component two in the formal teaching process. We look at a wide variety of social skill curriculums and evaluate the content, process, cost, interactiveness, etc.

Component three is to **teach** the skill. There usually needs to be some organized teaching, some kind of intentional structured experience for the children. The most effective way to do this is to tell them about the skill, then show them the skill in action, and then allow them to practice the skill. After they have practiced the skill, it is also helpful for children to see the consequences of the incorrect use of the skill.

There are many methods of teaching the skills. Alberg (1994) lists several of the instructional strategies that are helpful. These include roleplaying, modeling, positive reinforcement, practice and rehearsal, prompting, and teaching. Teaching styles might include videos, workbooks, scripted plays, songs and rhymes, debates, writing and poetry, etc.

One of the forgotten components of teaching is making sure that the student can transfer or generalize the information to new situations. This is not an automatic process. Elliot (1991) addresses some guidelines for facilitating generalization. These guidelines are to teach in different places; teach with different people; use a variety of teaching styles; work with the parents and school-teachers; and help the children learn how to self-evaluate. Transfer and generalization can happen with specific generalization instruction (Schumaker, 1992).

Finally, component four of the formal teaching process is to follow through. Social skills are not quick fixes. Learning the skills takes time, and a commitment to stick with the process for the long term. To follow through is to continue to remind them of the skills they are learning at the specific times when they should be using the skills.

Teaching Social Skills Formally

1. Evaluate the need

a. which skill is lacking?
b. is there a social skill deficit?
c. is there a performance deficit?
d. is there a self-control deficit?

2. Research Curriculums

3. Teach

a. tell, show, do
b. use many methods of teaching
c. facilitating transfer and generalization

4. Follow through

Table 2

8. Teaching Social Skills Informally

If informal teaching is not a follow-up to the formal teaching, very few children will learn the social skills. The informal teaching process, which lasts forever, is just as important and sometimes more important than the formal teaching.

School-age care-givers influence children in three ways: by the experiences they provide, by the relationships they nurture, and by the environment they construct. The informal process of teaching social skills can be broken down into these three areas.

We can provide the children with experiences for practicing the social skill. We construct many opportunities to practice the skill and to remind them to use the skill. We may provide the experiences for peer mediation, and mentoring by older children.

Social skills are not quick fixes. Learning the skills takes time, and a commitment to stick with the process for the long term.

We also teach the social skill through our relationships. Some children want to be like us, and so they act accordingly. Others will learn the skill because they believe we will be pleased. Some children will learn the skill by our gentle, nurturing affirmation over the long-term. Some children will see us modeling the skill (perhaps without our knowledge) in our discussions with other staff and children. Finding the teachable moment stems from our capacity to know the children.

Finally, we construct an environment. How does the emotional landscape help to teach the skill? The attitudes and the emotions we nurture will tell the children what we expect.

The physical environment is important, too. For example, Kids First Child Care has been teaching conflict resolution. They have a place in their main room that is the conflict resolution corner. If two kids go there, it means they have a problem and shouldn't be disturbed. There is a poster on the wall in the corner that identifies the four steps to conflict resolution.

9. Teaching Specific Social Skills

Communication

Johnnie doesn't listen. Her eyes glaze over when an adult is talking to her. She is an intelligent girl, and has no other problems getting along with children. But when the staff person is talking, Johnnie is talking, dreaming, or preoccupied.

Staff are afraid that someday, Tony will explode. When he gets angry (which is frequently), tenses up all over; his face goes red; sometimes he quivers ever so slightly. But Tony never makes a scene, never has an outburst. He tenses up for a moment, and then pretends the event never happened. He seems to stuff the feelings of anger deep down. When staff have spoken to his mother about the problem, she says he has been doing it since the divorce.

Communication encompasses the skills of interpersonal relations. Listening and appropriate expression of emotions and feelings are important for a person's health.

Teaching communication means to help children see where communication has failed, especially after real-life communication failures. It means to help children understand what defines healthy communication, assertiveness, and emotional expression.

Conflict Resolution

Phil is an aggressive second-grader. He is quick to hit others, quick to have a temper tantrum, and quick to escalate an interaction into a hostile encounter. The other kids are afraid to play with him, because he plays too rough.

When the third grade girls have a problem, Sabrina starts off okay. But before the negotiation goes very far, Sabrina has yelled at her friends and stomped off in anger. She loses her temper quickly, and gets too frustrated in the process.

Human beings argue. It is natural, normal, and part of human existence. Conflict resolution involves a wide range of skills, capacities, and perceptions. Living together is a critical skill to learn. The skills can include an attitude that regards aggression to be undesirable, to the complex skills of negotiation. We need more strategies to solve issues short of violence.

Teaching conflict resolution takes some significant teaching time, and then monitored follow-up of their resolution techniques. Peer mediation and mentoring by older children is helpful to the process.

Community-Building

Yung, a kindergartner, shares the toys he brings from home. When another child starts to cry, he rushes to their side. He sees himself as a part of the group, and likes to play with a wide variety of children.

Group time seems to drive Anna crazy. Anna wants her needs met, even if everyone else would have to be inconvenienced. She seems not to understand that other people have needs, too.

Community-building is the stuff of getting along with others. Friendship, cooperation, and empathy are integral parts of community. Being part of a group is important to all of us at some level. Those who can identify their groupness are closer to achieving all the skills of community-building.

Teaching community is to help kids be sensitive to the many people in the group, and that we care about everyone's needs. It is to speak with clarity about the many skills of community-building—kindness, empathy, delayed gratification, and sharing.

Control

"Ryan stole my pencil! I **had** to hit him!" pleads Stevie, looking as if a great injustice is about to be thrust on him. For Stevie, it was Ryan's fault that he was hit. Choice and self-control are not the issue. If Stevie continued this mindset for years to come, someday he would be hitting his own children because they didn't clean up their rooms. He would strike his wife because she "disobeyed him."

Stevie's issue is an external locus of control. For Stevie, it is always someone else's fault. The things he decides do not have much to do with the future. It is luck, fate, and the roll of the die.

The skill of control is about independence and self-discipline. It is to be responsible and self-controlled. It is to follow through.

Teaching for control is to help kids understand that they are responsible for their own choices and actions. It is to give them the chances to be independent and self-disciplined, and allow them to suffer the consequences when they choose to be undisciplined.

Confidence

Randy boasts constantly about his own accomplishments. Sometimes he remembers events selectively, so that he can brag about his prowess even more. Randy is insecure, with a low self-esteem that is hidden by a facade of self-aggrandizement.

Sally can laugh at herself, joke with others. She tries new things even when she knows there is a good chance of failure. She seems to have an accurate picture of her strengths and weaknesses, her abilities and limitations.

Confidence is to have high self-esteem, an accurate and healthy self-assessment, a belief that one has the capacity and the tools with which to contribute to the system. Seligman (1995) makes a case for the character of optimism as the primary protective factor for depression and low functioning.

Teaching confidence is to celebrate successes (and failures) with the children, letting them know they are acceptable regardless of their behavior, their success, or their lack of success.

...the changes in the family have better met the needs of adults, more than the needs of children.

Coping

Characteristic of all elementary school children, twenty-five percent of the children at Albert Einstein Elementary School suffer from physical symptoms with a psychosocial cause (Nader, 1993). Saundra pulls her hair. Tommy is wild and out of control. Diana has mood extremes. Xia's stomach hurts.

Aquanetta hides her emotional pain by making others mad at her. Karen hides her inside pain by hurting herself on the outside. Gregory has a panic attack every time adults move quickly toward him.

Coping is a learned behavior. It is a plethora of skills, attitudes, and knowledge, including health, nutrition, exercise, play, rest, social support, and the ability to de-stress. It is knowing the places to find resources to bring to bear on the stresses and strains of life.

Evaluating Social Skills Worksheet

Community-Building				
Coping				
Curiosity				
Confidence				
Control				
Conflict Resolution				
Communication				
	Observed Social Skill	Skill Deficit	Performance Deficit	Self-Control Deficit

Instructions:
Watch the group, with this worksheet in hand. As you see the group interact, watch for the skill of community-building. *Then make check marks in the box—whether you see community-building being displayed positively, or whether you see a deficit in skill, performance, or self-control. Then look at* coping, *doing the same thing. Use this worksheet over the course of several days, in different rooms and with different activities. At the end of the watching period, tally up the results, and you will see what skill you should work on, and you will see how you should work on it.This sheet can also be used with one child.*

Table 3

Teaching coping means to help kids experience a variety of techniques to let off steam. It means to help them understand what stress is and what is going on inside of them.

Curiosity

Timmy is apathetic toward everything. He never engages himself, never throws himself into any project or hobby. Timmy walks around the room, surveying everything, but never trying anything. He frequently complains of being bored. Among the schoolteachers, he is famous for his frequently asked question: "Is this going to be on the test?"

Rod doesn't smile. He can't play, can't enjoy a joke. He is a nervous, uptight little boy, with little flexibility. Things must be a certain way for him, otherwise he is in confusion. He does what is asked of him, but never more—he never exerts himself to learn, or to play, or to laugh.

Curiosity is the capacity to have a wide range of interests, and to intrinsically seek knowledge. It includes humor, play, and emotional flexibility.

Teaching curiosity is to be wide-eyed with wonder at new discoveries and new images. It is to help children see the joy of learning. It is to help remove stumbling blocks of rigidity, apathy, and grimness.

10. Conclusions

Living together means to be able to interact. Effective interaction is social competence. Learning the skills to make friends, resolve conflict, understand social situations, understand self in relation to others are skills that children need to learn in order to function in society.

In longitudinal studies of elementary age children, at-risk children showed up in higher numbers in psychiatric penal institutions. One of the most robust predictors of later psychiatric difficulties was peer rejection. Children who learn social competence grow into adults who are socially competent. The foundation of adult functioning finds its roots in childhood (Duck, 1991).

Studies in youth resiliency suggest that social skills are a protective factor against stress (Luthar, 1991; Luthar & Doernberger, 1992). Children who experienced a two-year social skills curriculum showed higher levels of prosocial behavior than the control group, and lower levels of antisocial behavior, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior. These results were identified four to six years later.

A generation ago, learning social skills was a natural part of the socialization process. Children spent an average of three to four hours a day with an adult, usually a grandparent or other member of the extended family. Children learned social skills by being with others, by talking with adults. A generation ago, children lived in a *gemeinschaft*, a social system characterized by having only one role and one set of expectations. Grandparents, accessible as neighbors to over 75% of the children, were able to be teachers, parent educators, and bring the wisdom of the years to the family.

Today, only one percent of the children have the same accessibility to the grandparent. Some studies say parents spend as little as seven minutes a day with their children. Children live in a *gezellschaft* today, a social system where every new activity is with a new group of people, and there are corresponding new expectations with each new group of people. Today children have engaging video games and television, which are solitary activities by their nature. Children simply no longer learn the social skills that they used to learn.

What once happened naturally, must now be taught intentionally. And teaching social skills works.

While the teaching of social skills is not a panacea for the evils of the world, there is voluminous evidence that teaching social skills works, and that social skills are robust predictors of healthy social functioning.

11. Questions for Discussion

1. Pick one of the seven social skills. Where did you personally learn it? When? How?

2. List some of the children at your site. Take an educated guess as to the social skills they know. Which ones don't they know?

3. What do you think is the biggest social skill need at your site? What is the biggest social skill need in the U.S. today?

4. What might be some ways to teach the social skill your site needs?

5. Why do think the lack of social skills correlates with children ending up in prison?

6. Can you think of a social skill not listed in the seven social skills categories?

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